

Spacing out at ... band camp

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Imagine an alien invasion last night in Crescent City. A group of youthful musicians here did just that, playing an appropriate soundtrack to accompany such a sci-fi spectacular.

The performance featured this year's participants in Amy Ross's North Coast Summer Band Camp at Crescent Elk Middle School.

The musicians were fifth- through eighth-grade band members from Crescent City and Brookings schools, sprinkled with more-experienced high school musicians filling in.

Now in her 25th year running the camp, and the first year since she retired as music teacher at Crescent Elk, Ross said this year's theme was "Solar System and Space."

The students practiced Aug. 5-9 to perform recognizable sci-fi staples such as John Williams's "Theme from Star Wars" and the lesser-known but equally challenging "Aliens Landing in the Backyard."

Ross said the camp is a good way for the developing musicians to keep their skills honed over the summer break.

"On Monday, it always sounds pretty ragged," said Ross. "With only one or two years of experience, this music can be a lot harder (for the students) than anything they've done before. There's a lot of notes to learn and new rhythms to read.

"But it's amazing the progress they make over five days."

In past years, the camp has enrolled as many as 70 band members. (Sorry, no strings in the band, Ross said.) But this year, there was a smaller turnout, 25 campers. So, the 10 high school helpers and seven staff took on

greater importance as mentors and fill-ins.

Joshua Peterson, 19, a recent Brookings High School graduate, was one of those who volunteered to be a helper as he awaits enrolling at Southwestern Oregon Community College's Curry campus.

"I love this camp," said Peterson. "It gets everyone together to prepare them for the next year."

Peterson has been playing bass guitar for five years. After three years of participating in the camp, this was his first as a high-school helper.

"As the experienced musician, you have to help more than those in your own section," he said. "You get questions like how to play a rhythm, was this the right note."

"Ms. Ross does a great job with the kids, making sure they get the help they need."

Some students attend the camp for reasons easy to understand, such as Patince Diehl, a Crescent Elk Middle School student now in her second year on baritone sax (or barry sax, for short).

"Why'd I join band camp? Why not? I love band. It's really fun, spending time with people and playing music."

For others, summer band camp offers an opportunity to hone up on an instrument they're still just learning, like Del Norte freshman James Appel, who has been playing tenor saxophone for just half a year.

"I switched over from percussion, after starting with the clarinet," said Appel. "So, I joined band camp to warm up for high school. I changed to sax because I like the feeling of moving your fingers and changing notes. It's really fun, being part of a band."

Appel isn't the only one who's switched instruments before settling on one instrument of choice. Charley Tygart initially followed her father, as a trombonist, in the third grade. But school district music programs don't begin until the fifth grade, when she chose to switch to percussion.

Now in the seventh grade, she felt drawn back to the trombone at Crescent Elk Middle School. And, Tygart admits, she came into camp a little rusty. "It'd been all summer since I'd played music or heard music," she said.

"Coming in here the first day, I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, I don't understand.' It's so much more difficult. But I didn't panic."

Helping the young musicians from feeling overwhelmed was Kristen Volta, Ross's replacement as Crescent Elk's music teacher. The 23-year-old recent graduate of Northern Arizona University admitted she probably looks about the same age as some of the older students.

"Band is so enjoyable, so important to education and kids' academic life," she said. "This one-week band camp can be tough for the sixth- and seventh-graders, but it's a helpful jumpstart for those who have been too busy over the summer. It gets them thinking again about playing music."

One of the exercises Volta uses to help indecisive, often younger, students choose the proper instrument is “instrument petting zoo.” She lays out the instruments for the students to handle and play a bit ... ensuring to sanitize the mouthpieces before passing them along.

“The instruments require a different embouchure to play,” she said, scrunching up her lips to demonstrate the different pucker it takes to play a trumpet versus a clarinet. “We find that kids adapt better to one over the other, and we help steer them in the right direction.”

When Volta took the director’s baton during “Planets,” a piece she chose for the band camp, Ross sat in with the students on flute. She’ll continue to help Volta with the summer program however she’s needed.

Said Volta: “Ross is big, big shoes to fill. The kids adore her. She has helped so many of them through the years.